

Green, W. King, E. & Gallagher, J. (2019). How can international learning experiences enhance employability? Critical insights from new graduates and the people who employ them. In R. Coelen and C Gribble (Eds). *Internationalisation and Employability in Higher Education*. Routledge, Oxfordshire, UK.

How can international learning experiences enhance employability? Critical insights from new graduates and the people who employ them.

Introduction

With reports of a downturn in graduate employment rates (Karmel & Carroll, 2016), universities are keen to ensure that their students develop clear and tangible career pathways (Matherly & Tillman, 2015). In this climate, the rationale for promoting 'outbound mobility experiences' (OME)¹ has shifted from the traditional focus on their personal and cultural benefits to their benefits in terms of employability. Governments and higher education institutions, which fund outbound mobility programs, now expect OME to be transformative of participants' professional as well as personal lives (British Academy, 2012; DFAT, 2017).

Yet, the benefits of international experience to employers and to new graduates tends to be assumed rather than understood. Researchers have long decried the lack of empirical evidence about employers' perspectives on this topic (King, Findlay & Aherns, 2010). Likewise, little attention has been given to the 'uses' students make of their international experiences in terms of career development and employability (Potts, 2015). In preference to the term graduate 'outcomes', Rizvi introduced the term, 'uses' of international education to signify the ongoing, agentic processes through which 'students struggle to make sense of their experiences in [a foreign country]; the ways in which they assess their past and imagine their future; and the ways in which they feel positioned and actively locate themselves within dominant [political and cultural] narratives' (Rizvi, 2005, p.81). As such, Rizvi's term is consistent with recent work by Bennett (2016), who defines employability as the ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work across lengthening career lifespans. Taking this perspective here, we consider employability to be a developmental and agentic process, which must begin long before students graduate and continue throughout their lives.

Based on a recent nationally funded Australian project, this chapter presents fresh insights on the perceived benefits of outbound mobility experiences (OME) to employability, from the perspectives of past participants in OME and from the employers of new graduates. The research was conducted across three Australian universities and included the engagement of prominent employers of new graduates in nationally and internationally oriented workplaces.

Background

During the past decade, there has been a notable increase globally in the development and promotion of student mobility experiences, as evidenced by the significant funding of

¹ Throughout this article the term outbound mobility experiences (OME) is primarily used to signify a student's experience of undertaking an academic activity in another country while remaining formally enrolled in an institution in the home country. Such experiences may include study abroad, international internships, international study programs, outbound mobility, or student exchange.

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programs such as the USA's Generation Study Abroad program, the European Erasmus+ program, the "Re-vitalization Strategy" of Japan and the Brazilian initiative *Science Without Borders*, among others. In Australia, the context of this study, the *New Colombo Plan* (NCP), launched in 2014, was developed by the Australian government to lift knowledge of the Indo-Pacific region by supporting undergraduates to study and undertake internships in the region. The program, which encompasses both a prestigious scholarship scheme as well as funding for discipline-specific mobility projects, has made available \$50 million to fund approximately 10,000 students annually. Students have access to funding to undertake short and longer-term study, internships, mentorships, practicums and research. By the end of 2018, it is expected that more than 30,000 Australians will have been funded to study and undertake internships in the Indo-Pacific through the NCP program (DFAT, 2017).

The rationale behind these initiatives is multifaceted. Mobility programs are expected to not only benefit the individual but also support broader institutional and national economic and social interests by creating people-to-people links and knowledge sets which benefit educational linkages, corporate relations and international diplomacy efforts. At the core of these national funding schemes for student mobility has been the aim for students to develop global competencies and have access to a global network of peers, collaborations and employers. Universities worldwide have been quick to leverage mobility funding schemes, recognising the wide-reaching benefits of international mobility experiences and purported links to strong employment outcomes. Indeed, student mobility experiences have now been almost inextricably linked with the employability agenda in higher education.

Literature review

OME is widely associated with the development of professionally relevant skills and dispositions (Adams, Banks, & Olsen, 2011), and universities market such programs, promising they will provide participants with a 'competitive edge' in a tightening graduate job market (Potts, 2015). Such claims however are not well supported by research. There are few studies that have comprehensively examined the impact of OME on employability from the perspectives of new graduates (Potts, 2015) or employers (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; King et al 2010). Of those studies which do focus on employability, few have comprehensively considered whether the nature of OME – in terms of duration, location, and professional relevance – has an impact on employability. Instead, OME research has tended to focus on areas of personal growth and transformation. While many studies find OME promotes personal growth (McNamee & Faulker, 2001; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005), some have argued that students' self-reported 'transformation' may be a self-fulfilling prophecy (Sutton & Rubin, 2010) and suggest that transformational 'epiphanies' can be 'fake' or temporary' (Mernard-Warwick & Palmer, 2012, p.132)

Among those studies which focus specifically on OME graduate's perspectives of employability, Teichler (2007) found that former ERASMUS students did not believe that their OME advantaged them in terms of income and social status during their early career. Indeed, they felt that the professional value of OME was declining, although it remained

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professionally valuable for Central and Eastern European students. In contrast, Franklin's (2010) American study revealed that the majority of OME alumni ten years after their international experience believed that the knowledge, skills, and self-awareness gained through OME were professionally applicable, and that their international experience had positively shaped their career path, leading them to gravitate toward positions with an international/multicultural dimension.

Findings regarding the professional value of OME may be context-specific (Potts 2015). Potts' (2015) study of Australian OME alumni provides insights into the benefits of international study in relation to employability, current job and early career development. Participants in this study identified the development of at least four areas associated with employability: communication skills, teamwork skills, problem solving skills, and self-management skills. Potts also found that the majority (65%) of respondents believed their OME was most helpful in obtaining their first job, but less relevant once they began work. The majority (63%) believed that their OME would have a positive impact on their longer-term career prospects however. There is some evidence that this expectation of future value may be warranted (Crossman & Clarke 2009; Molony et al., 2011; Prospect Marketing, 2006).

Further research is required in order to understand employers' perspectives on OME. While several studies conducted in the EU (Bracht et al 2006; Teihler 2012) suggest that OME is viewed positively by European employers during the recruitment process, one British report concluded that 'solid evidence on employers' perspectives on international student mobility is a major lacuna in research' (King *et al.* 2010, p. 47). When employers were asked in another British study to list the qualities and attributes they look for in graduate employees, international experience did 'not come high on the list, if it is mentioned at all' (Fielden et al., 2007, p. 14). In the Australian context, one of the few large-scale studies (Prospect Marketing, 2006) found that more employers in multinational firms (70%) valued OME than state-based or national employers (43% and 55% respectively). Norris and Gillespie (2009) found a similar pattern in the US. The 2006 Prospect Marketing study also found that although overseas study was viewed positively by potential employers, it was considered to be unimportant against other skills, attributes, and experiences when evaluating graduate candidates. A comparative international study (Molony et al, 2011) indicates that undervaluing of OME by Australian employers has persisted, with the finding that just 34% of Australian employers value international experience in comparison to the global average of 60%. According to Molony et al. (2011), Australian employers' low appreciation of OME may be because: Australian students tend to go abroad to culturally/linguistically familiar places; few employers have studied abroad so they don't see the benefits; and graduates and universities do not articulate OME benefits in employer-relevant terms, while the OME discourse emphasizes personal not professional benefits.

Taken together, these studies suggest that our understanding of the professional value of OME from the perspectives of employees and employers is emergent. Broadly speaking, indications are that employers, particularly in international and globally oriented organisations value OME. Yet, there may be significant regional differences in this respect,

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with employers in Anglophone countries more likely to undervalue international experience than those in the EU. Regardless of location however, the research reviewed here suggests that OME alumni must be able to articulate the value of OME in a language relevant to their employer: international experience may have value to employers *if* graduates are able to reframe their stories in language employers understand (Gardner, Steglitz & Gross, 2009; Jones, 2013; Gothard, Gray & Downey, 2012). As a corollary of this finding, some researchers are pointing to the role universities must play in formally supporting students' development of professional skills and identities through OME (Gothard et al., 2012; Potts, 2015; VandeBerg, 2007). From these tentative conclusions, new questions arise, including:

1. What are the approaches and strategies taken by new OME graduates who successfully secure graduate positions and manage their early careers in their chosen field?
2. How do these 'successful graduates' develop and use these approaches and strategies?
3. How and why do current employers of graduates from Australian universities value, or not value OME?
4. Are there some types of OMEs that are more professionally valuable than others, for example in terms of duration, location and work experience opportunities?

Methodology

To explore these questions in the Australian context, we conducted individual semi-structured interviews with two groups of informants: 14 recent graduates who had undertaken international study/internships while at university and were subsequently employed in graduate positions, and eight employers of recent graduates. Both graduates and employers were purposefully selected in order to provide maximum diversity regarding gender, discipline, field of employment, cultural-linguistic backgrounds, and for graduates, host countries for their OME. In addition to ensuring diversity, only those graduates who had successfully applied for graduate positions in their chosen field were selected for this study. At the time of the interviews, our graduates had been working in their first graduate positions for a period of six to 12 months in the following fields; journalism, law, medicine, engineering, marketing, business, and public policy. They were based in positions around Australia and overseas.

The employers invited to participate in interviews worked in the public and private sector, and in large and medium-sized businesses/organisations. Surprisingly, to us, many employers declined our invitation, stating the following reasons; they had not thought about the value of OME and felt they had nothing of value to say; it was not important to their business; they had negative perceptions about OME and felt they would be unhelpful to the researchers. All employers agreeing to be interviewed were based in Australia at the time of the interview although just over half of them represented international or globally oriented workplaces, while the rest were from locally/nationally oriented businesses. They were in leadership positions in financial planning, banking, law, the public service, health, education, and telecommunications.

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During the interviews graduates were asked to tell their own story about their OME, their career aspirations, current employment and longer term aims. They were prompted to elaborate on approaches and strategies during each phase of their OME – preparation, time abroad, and the return home – as well as the role their OME played during the recruitment phase and day to day work. Employers were asked about what they generally looked for in new graduates and specifically about their perceptions of OMEs in relation to graduate employability.

The interviews, lasting between 45 minutes to one hour were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically. Beginning with some potential themes gleaned from our literature review, we took an inductive and iterative approach to analysing the transcripts, moving recursively, back and forth between the transcripts, the literature, and emerging themes until we found the best fit (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All participants were given the opportunity to comment on the emerging findings during the analytical process, and this was incorporated into the final analysis.

All participants understood the ethical implications of their involvement in the study and signed consent forms before their interviews. To protect their privacy, we have avoided the provision of detailed personal information and have assigned numbers to employers (for example E1), and to graduates (for example G1).

Findings regarding recent graduate and employer perceptions of the benefits of OME to employability

Not surprisingly, analysis of the interviews mirrored previous studies regarding perceived benefits of OME regarding perceptions of personal growth. Following a brief summary of these findings below, we elaborate on additional findings which bring new insights to our understanding of perceptions about OMEs specifically in terms of employability. Employers' and graduates' perceptions of OME are grouped thematically: firstly, in terms of its relevance to recruitment and early careers; secondly, in relation to the type of OME undertaken; and thirdly, in relation to the specific strategies employed by the new graduates to realise the professional value of their OME.

Personal growth

Our graduate participants had little doubt that their OMEs propelled their personal growth. In line with previous research (Potts, 2015; Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005), they spoke of developing life skills, such as adaptability, resourcefulness, resilience, problem solving, patience, help-seeking behaviours, organisational skills, interpersonal skills (such as rapport building, conflict resolution, negotiation, assessing and demonstrating trustworthiness), leadership and independence. Overall, they felt they developed more confidence in their capacity to handle challenging situations in the future. Many commented on their development of empathy and worldliness – a sense of perspective and appreciation for alternate worldviews. Some felt they had become less egocentric, self-conscious, culturally blind and dependent as a result of their experiences overseas. Interestingly, while the graduates emphasised different aspects of personal growth from OMEs, they all believed

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that it enhanced their employability, and they gave specific examples of using such skills and attitudes during recruitment and while at work.

Employers too unanimously saw personal growth as an outcome of OME; although the degree that it was valued in relation to employability differed between employers. For example, E6, a HR manager for a corporate investment firm with national and international bases and clients, 'place[d] a good degree of emphasis [on the personal growth gained from OME] because ... it demonstrates courage, get up and go, resilience'. E3, the foreign-born owner/manager of a locally-based financial planning firm with some international clients also saw some value in OME related personal growth, but he placed more emphasis on work experience in the local context.

Relevance at the recruitment phase

All graduates felt that their OME helped them successfully apply for their current positions. They were thoughtful and proactive in drawing attention to experiences and highlighting benefits in terms of relevance to their prospective employers in their resumes and interviews. They felt that their OME gave them something to talk about in their interview and helped them to impart a sense of who they were and the qualities they possessed. For example, some referred to their OME as concrete evidence of their ability to move to a new city and establish social and professional networks. Because they felt confident in their ability to meet these and other associated challenges, they generally felt the interview process was in itself less daunting than it would otherwise be.

While all employers we interviewed recognised the personal growth benefits of OME, they stressed that in and of itself, OME would not automatically make students more employable. As E4, the HR manager of a nation-wide accounting firm explains: 'I don't think we would view the [OME] in itself as something that would add value to the organisation'. Some felt OME contributed to the overall appeal of the candidate. E6 viewed it 'very favourably', for a number of reasons as he explains:

Strategically, [E6's company] has a global growth agenda.... So having people that have some outside of Australia experience is really beneficial for that reason. Secondly, I think it builds a great sense of maturity and independence and worldliness. Being away from the nest, out of your comfort zone, it makes you grow up pretty quickly. I think that is a really strong attribute ... it demonstrates courage, get up and go, resilience - when you're a long way from home. The third thing, for me, is around perspective. Having worked offshore I know that Australia's just a small part of the world. Bringing a global mindset is a very valuable thing.

In contrast to employers like E6, some had less positive views of OMEs and explained that this shaped their approach to recruitment interviews. Several employers emphasised the importance of locally-derived knowledge and work experience and feared that time spent overseas meant less time to develop locally relevant knowledge and skills. This concern was brought home to one of the graduates in our study. G7, while a civil engineering student, had spent all his university holidays on language exchange programs in Asia. He was unsuccessful in securing employment as a civil engineer in Australia because employers

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preferred to recruit graduates who had spent their holidays gaining Australian industry experience. At the time of the interview, G7 was working for an Australian trade consultancy firm based in China.

Finally, new OME graduates were perceived to be 'flight risks' by some employers, even among those who were generally positive in their views of OME. As E4 explains:

The only risk we would see [with OME graduates is] that person could be a flight risk for us. They might not necessarily be looking to stay long term ... they might have an interest in being based overseas further into their career. That's not necessarily always an issue but it might ring some alarm bells for us when we are recruiting ... So that kind of more international, global focus might actually work against them.

Relevance in the workplace

Beyond recruitment, all new graduates and some employers felt graduates' OME held benefits for employability once in the workplace. Graduates spoke of many instances when they were able to draw on their international experience to enhance interactions within multicultural workplaces or create common ground with co-workers by swapping travel stories. They also felt that it was less daunting to move to a new city and establish new social networks; they were less afraid to ask for help and own up to mistakes; they coped better with day-to-day ups and downs, partly as a result of their OME. G9, a graduate in a marketing firm explains:

Travelling helps to train your mind to focus on what's important in those moments when you're being bombarded by thousands of different demands and wondering what direction you need to go in, what to pay attention to.

Some employers mentioned that they capitalised on their OME graduates' experiences, for example by pairing a graduate whose OME was in China with a client from Beijing. More often however, graduates and employers saw OME as a long-term investment, whose value would be most apparent later in their careers. Because they had observed that leaders in their respective industries had travelled and worked internationally, they reflected that international experience, even if not immediately useful, might be more important once they gained more experience. Only G4 already felt that the skills she developed through OME had helped her to progress her public service career more swiftly than her peers.

As the interviews with employers progressed, we noticed they tended to become more reflective about previously unrecognized benefits of OME. In the reflective space of the interview, some initially less positive employers came to mention several potential advantages of an OME graduate as the interview progressed. Advantages recognized with reflection included: enhanced cultural awareness and the capacity to speak languages other than English, particularly Mandarin, in the multi-cultural communities that their locally-based businesses served; the professional value of the graduate's development of 'get up and go', tenacity, perseverance; and international connections. Such shifts in perspective during the interview process suggest the potential value for universities in engaging employers in dialogue in a manner somewhat akin to 'learning conversations' (Laurillard 1997). This point will be taken up further in the following discussion section.

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Interestingly, one employer, E5, the CEO of a firm which organises international internships for students observed that 'Australia lags behind the rest of the world' in understanding the benefits of OME to employability. Mirroring research findings (e.g., Teichler 2012), E5 explained that in her experience, US and European employers in particular seek to recruit culturally aware graduates, given the increasingly globalised marketplace. 'If you want to prepare people for the world, and for global business and global career opportunities, then they need to do that abroad. I don't believe you can get ... real insight to another country and the culture until you live in that country'.

How important was the nature of the OME?

Employers were also asked whether the type of OME, in terms of its duration, nature (work, study or both) and location made a difference to its value. In contrast to some studies showing distinct preferences for specific types of OME among some employers (Franklin 2010; Norris and Gillespie 2009), our interviewees generally provided quite nuanced responses. Neither employers nor graduates believed that it mattered significantly whether the OME was part of a traditional student exchange or a work-related experience. Our employers and graduates generally felt that longer experiences - one to two semesters of study, or a three to six-month internships - offered the time, space and opportunities students needed to gain value from OME, whereas shorter experiences seemed too close to a holiday to get students 'out of their comfort zones'. Nevertheless, employers understood that the quality of OMEs differed between people, and that these differences could only be appreciated by talking to individual employees. As E7 explained:

On face value, a longer stint or an internship abroad seems more beneficial than just going off and doing a semester. But you generally don't know until you speak to the individual to see what they've gone through, how they've grown and valued the experience ... what they got out of it.

Disciplinary differences influenced whether or not the OME location was important. The engineering and medical graduates had chosen destinations that equipped them with knowledge/skills that could not be obtained through study in their home universities. For graduates of law, marketing and journalism however, the destination was not perceived to matter so much.

Our study concurred with Potts' (2015) Australian study in finding that graduates who had had multiple OMEs emphasised their value. Through multiple OMEs, they believed they had become more comfortable challenging themselves, for example by spending more time with locals and local students and less time with fellow exchange students. They found each OME went more smoothly, as they adapted faster and were able to turn their attention to other professional opportunities. For example, when medical student, G5 went on her third international exchange, she felt confident enough to ask her supervisors if she could do a clinical audit for the surgical ward at the hospital she was placed at. On G4's third exchange, she managed to work with locals to organise a donation scheme whereby exchange students could donate unwanted furniture at the conclusion of their stay.

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Capitalising on the benefits – before, during and after OMEs

The strongest, most consistent finding in our study concerns the importance of student agency in realising the employability benefits of OME. Common to all the graduates' narratives were three themes: they had actively pursued and planned for career-enhancing opportunities before, during and after their time abroad; they recognised the importance of documenting and reflecting on experiences; and they developed the ability to reframe their travel experiences (travel stories) in order to make them relevant in specific professional contexts (career stories).

Pursuing professional development before, during and after being abroad

While some students experience disconnection between their time abroad and their life at home, seeing their time away as a 'dream' or 'living in a bubble' (Green & Leggett, 2015), the graduates in this study understood OME as having three important interconnected phases: *preparing, being there* and *coming back*. Before departure they sought out connections that would help them plan where to go, and how to line up internships/professional development opportunities. This they continued to do while away and after they returned home. G7 and G4, for example, both involved themselves with Australia Chamber of Commerce, Embassy events, and Australia-China Youth Associations during their China-based OMEs. Journalism graduate, G6 explained how, at the conclusion of her study and internship in Washington DC, she was able to stay on in the US to take a job with a politician leading into the US mid-terms. This afforded her access to places like the State of the Union address and the Iowa caucuses: 'there were lots of things that I did that I would never have thought I would be able to do as an exchange student'. Back home, the graduates continued to build on their OME by becoming more engaged in their studies and co-curricular activities. G1, who had studied in a Canadian university, made more of an effort to engage with lecturers and joined an international student society upon her return, while G4 purposefully made an effort to work with international students on group projects, thereby continuing to develop professionally valuable skills.

The theme of networking, building upon, and extending international relationships featured strongly in the new graduates' accounts of their time before departure, while away and upon returning home. This finding may be reflective of the relatively high socio-economic status of OME students from Australian universities and particularly from the 'group of eight' highest ranked universities (Daly 2011). Indeed research (Green, Gannaway, Sheppard and Jamarani 2015) undertaken at one of the three universities involved in this study found that OME participants generally had high cultural, social and economic capital and enjoyed 'multiple dimensions of privilege [that] typically work to make study abroad imaginable, affordable and do-able' (p. 513). Such students, who have typically travelled internationally with their families are more likely to feel confident about forging international connections at the start of their OMEs. At the same time, the new graduates in this study typically sought advice about networking from lecturers at their home and host universities, rather than drawing on their families' social capital. This suggests universities and their staff could do more to guide OME students in the development of networking skills.

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Documenting and reflecting

Self-reflection was another common theme across the graduate interviews. Some graduates felt they became more self-reflective about their goals, their view of the world and their place in it during their OME. This in turn helped them to refine and focus their career goals; for example, a stint volunteering on a student-run radio station while abroad led G2, a science major to refocus his career aspirations to science communication. G6, who was already studying journalism realised that her career focus would be on political journalism. While some reflection might be expected (a brief reflective exercise being a condition of their scholarships) some of our interviewees showed considerable reflexivity. As G4 found: 'Now that I've had these overseas experiences.....I can see where I've come from and how I've developed from those experiences'. In contrast, others did not readily engage in reflection until they were applying for jobs. Indeed, all interviewees (employers and graduates) could see value in a formal resource designed to support reflection on OMEs and articulate the benefits in terms of employability attributes. As G12 speculated:

Not everyone has the foresight and self-awareness to really actively reflect on their experience. When you're away you wouldn't necessarily be [thinking about] employment later. Making time for that [especially] after you come back is really important and a structured program where you can reflect would [be helpful].

Further emphasising the need to support a more rigorous process of reflection for OME students, our graduate interviewees contrasted their own attitude to what they believed to be a general perception amongst their peers that a semester abroad was fun, a break from studying as it didn't count towards their GPA, and an opportunity to party and sightsee. Our interviewees felt that many OME peers did not realise how it could develop their employability. As G4 commented: 'the way the exchange is promoted....is that it's fun, time to party and have the best time of your life. But no one really thinks - what if you actually focus on your career and what you can do to enhance that – as well as having fun'.

Re-storying – from travel story to career story

The graduates also shared an ability to reframe their experiences abroad into narratives that were relevant to the specific demands of the job – an ability that is vital in job interviews. For example, G9 explained:

I would bring up stories of what I'd done abroad to demonstrate how I've acted in a particular circumstance or how I've displayed a particular skill. In my interview they asked me how I managed stress. I talked about when I was snowboarding in the Rockies and there was an avalanche. We needed to get out of it. We needed to stay focussed and work as a team.

Discussion

Through extended individual interviews we engaged deeply with employers of graduates and new graduates who had successfully applied for graduate positions, in order to develop a nuanced understanding of employability development as a long and complex process

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involving a high degree of student agency. The views of the employers interviewed, as well as those who declined to participate concurs with, and extends previous research on employer attitudes. While those employers in globally oriented workplaces were more likely than those more locally oriented to view OME as favourable, both nationally and internationally focussed employers stressed that employees must articulate how and why their OME is professionally relevant. Generally, employers also perceived OME to be more valuable for mid-career rather than in entry-level positions. In line with previous research (Gardner, Steglitz & Gross 2009; Jones 2013; Prospect Marketing 2006), these findings emphasise the importance of new graduates clearly explaining the value of their OME in terms relevant to each employment situation. In addition, our interviews provide new insights regarding employers' negative preconceptions of OME, such as fears of OME alumni being 'flight risks' and having insufficient local knowledge and experience.

Thematic analysis of our graduates' accounts of their OME - from pre-departure, time abroad, return to university and into their first graduate positions - revealed how they developed specific strategies at each of these stages in order to enhance the professional benefits of their experience. These strategies included: actively planning for learning experiences in the understanding that the value of OME does not stem from the fact of going, but from what one learns while away; actively building career-related networks at each stage of the OME; documenting and reflecting on career-relevant experience at each stage of the OME; and 're-storying' personal experiences into career-relevant stories when applying for positions and beginning their graduate working lives.

Although we do not intend to generalise such findings from this small qualitative study, a number of implications for both practice and research can be drawn when we consider our findings in the context of the current literature. Our study lends further weight to calls for formal learning programs to assist students to plan for, reflect on, identify and articulate the value of OME in terms of employability. Informed by our findings and the current literature, we developed an online, multi-media, co-curricular program, which supports students' development of professionalism and key employability skills at each phase of their international experience [de-identified]. Titled, [de-identified] this program is divided into three modules (*Preparing, Being there, and Coming back*), which align with the three OME phases identified by researchers (Gothard et al., 2012) and by our OME graduate interviewees. This program provides students with a structured approach to maximising the potential value of OME by guiding students at each stage in planning, networking, documenting, reflecting, and 'restorying.'

Another implication concerns the need to promote awareness about the benefits of OME to employers. If global mobility programs are to have the desired impact on employability, more attention needs to be given to understanding employers' perspectives. Interviews with employers in this study revealed a tendency to underestimate the employability benefits of OMEs. Interestingly, a Finnish study (CIMO 2014) highlighted similar findings and concluded that the competences acquired through OME are 'hidden: we are not able to express or recognise them' (p.5).

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Observing that in the dialogic space of the semi-structured interviews, employers tended to become more reflective about the possible benefits of OME as their interview progressed, our study suggests the potential value of research that engages employers in 'learning conversations' (Laullilard, 1997). From this perspective, employers' perceptions – like students' perceptions – are socially constructed and open to change through dialogue. By extending the approach we took in this study, we might for example, in future engage with employers in participatory action research, in order to open up possibilities of changes to the perceptions and practices of all parties involved (Kemmis, 2007).

Indeed, this study has revealed several other avenues for further research. Few studies to date have investigated employability related differences between different types of OME. Of those that have some provide contradictory findings (Franklin 2010; Norris and Gillespie 2009). On the other hand, our study shows that a select number of employers had no preconceived notions regarding the duration, location and type of program; rather they felt that it was up to individual students to find and articulate professionally valuable experiences in any type of OME. Further larger scale studies – across and between different geo-political regions - are needed before we can have clarity on this question. Another area in need of further research concerns the longer-term employability benefits of OME. One large scale recent study (Farrugia and Sanger 2017) of 4500 American students found that longer OME programs generally have a higher impact on subsequent job offers and the development of employability skills than short term programs. Again however, the current and previous studies suggest that geopolitical context may be a significant factor. Finally, now that some universities are beginning to develop and offer formal programs to support student learning through OME, such programs need to be evaluated and improved through action research cycles.

Conclusion

Based on a recent nationally funded Australian project, this chapter has presented fresh insights into the perceived benefits of outbound mobility experiences (OME) to employability, from the perspectives of past participants in mobility programs and employers of new graduates. Regarding employers, our research confirmed and expanded upon previous findings that Australian employers tend to underestimate the benefits of new graduates' OME. Those employers in international organisations/businesses were more likely than those in national organisations to view OME as favourable. However, some employers expressed concerns that new OME graduates constituted 'flight risks' and may not have locally relevant knowledge and skills.

Also in line with previous research (e.g., Potts 2015), our new OME graduates clearly articulated what they believed were the personal and professional benefits of their OME. Furthermore, thematic analysis of their reflections - from pre-departure, time abroad, return to university and into their first graduate positions – provided fresh insights regarding specific strategies they had developed in order to enhance the professional benefits of their experience. In brief, these include: actively planning for learning experiences; actively building career-related networks at each stage of the OME;

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documenting and reflecting on career-relevant experience at each stage of the OME; continuing to develop international and employability-related capabilities after returning home; and 're-storying' personal experiences into career-relevant stories when applying for positions.

Our approach enabled deep engagement with employers, as well as a nuanced understanding of 'employability' development as a long and complex process involving a high degree of student agency. Our findings, interpreted in light of current research can inform the development of learning programs to support students' development of professionalism and key employability skills at each phase of their international experience - *Preparing, Being there, and Coming back*.

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